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OPEN-ENDED WORKING GROUP ON THE REVIEW
OF ARRANGEMENTS FOR CONSULTATION WITH
NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS
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Agenda item 2

# GENERAL REVIEW OF ARRANGEMENTS FOR CONSULTATION WITH NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Statement submitted by the World Federation of United Nations Associations, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (category I)

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 29 and 30 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) of 23 May 1968.

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In its fiftieth anniversary year, the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA) is honoured to address this session of the Working Group. As most of you are aware, WFUNA is an international non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, category I. WFUNA was one of the first non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to receive consultative status and has been working actively in support of the United Nations for the past 50 years.

On 2 February 1996 the United Nations Postal Administration will be issuing a series of stamps and a souvenir card to commemorate this very special anniversary of WFUNA. The following message from the Secretary-General, Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, will appear on the souvenir card that will be issued next month:

> "The World Federation of United Nations Associations has a central role to play in democratizing the United Nations. Thousands of individuals from United Nations associations, and indeed other non-governmental

organization, around the world who work voluntarily to promote the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations could be described as the incarnation of the compelling declaration with which the Preamble to the Charter begins: 'We the peoples of the United Nations ...'

"I commend WFUNA and its member United Nations associations for the valuable contribution they have made during the past 50 years in mobilizing popular support for the work and goals of the United Nations. Together, we will dedicate the next half century to a new collective effort in favour of peace, development and democracy."

It is precisely this future partnership that WFUNA would like to discuss.

WFUNA's main mission is to promote public understanding of the United Nations and to mobilize public support for its activities. There are 90 national member United Nations associations in all regions of the world, two thirds of which are in developing countries.

WFUNA's leadership has very great experience in the NGO community at the United Nations. Two Secretaries-General of WFUNA have served as President of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (CONGO), Mr. Horace Perera and Dr. Marek Hagmajer. Annabelle Wiener, Deputy Secretary-General, has served as First Vice-President of CONGO. In addition, she has served as Chairman of the Department of Public Information NGO Executive Committee and continues to serve on this Committee as an ex-officio member.

Though the importance of this may seem self-evident, it is worth stating at this time to illustrate the value of the diversity in the NGO community, distinguished by the present arrangements for consultation with NGOs.

However, there are those who would like to remove the distinction between the NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and those associated with the Department of Public Information (DPI) - in effect, to put all NGOs in the same category.

Because WFUNA is an NGO that both has consultative status and is associated with DPI, we know the root of the problem well. The DPI NGOs look upon the difference in status as a caste system or power struggle. It is certainly neither. Each has specific important duties and obligations to fulfil. The DPI NGOs are concerned with the dissemination of information on the United Nations, and the consultative NGOs on policy issues in the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary organs. These two bodies of NGOs must be kept separate.

The Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations is already overburdened; imagine what it would be like for them also to have to go through the process of having to review all of the DPI NGOs.

WFUNA is confident that the purpose of this review is to build on the positive experience of present arrangements for consultation, to provide new possibilities for NGO contribution and to extend participatory rights to those NGOs that do not enjoy consultative status. It is necessary to make sure,

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however, that those NGOs that already have consultative status maintain all the rights already provided to them through Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

Article 71 of the Charter of the United Nations provides for "arrangements for consultations with non-governmental organizations". Subsequently, Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV), in part I, paragraphs 1 through 8, specifies the requirements which must be fulfilled to obtain recognition as an international non-governmental organization. In fact, these paragraphs constitute the definition of international non-governmental organizations. Very similar criteria for recognition are applied by the Union of International Associations in the Yearbook of International Organizations.

In WFUNA's view, the provisions of Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) concerning the definition of international NGOs are satisfactory and should be strictly observed in granting consultative status. A viable definition of national NGOs must be determined.

All other entities, such as business groups, universities and municipalities, do not fall under the category of international NGOs and therefore should not be included in this group. However, taking into account the utility of expert contributions that these entities can make, it may be worthwhile to consider for them a separate form of recognition.

The situation of NGOs with regard to international conferences convened under United Nations auspices is far from satisfactory and requires urgent adoption of uniform and consistent rules. Although the recent international conferences admitted more NGOs as observers than in the past, these NGOs were not given any real participatory rights. This raised a lot of complaints and discontent, including suppositions that the United Nations is not truly interested in NGO participation.

In our opinion, the rules for the conferences should grant similar rights to those that NGOs enjoy with the Economic and Social Council, and these rights should be allowed to be exercised from the beginning of the preparatory process. WFUNA is ready to submit, at an appropriate time, a concrete proposal concerning such rules.

WFUNA would like to emphasize that in the case of international conferences, the rules should be uniform for NGOs in consultative status and other NGOs admitted by special procedures, like those for recent international conferences.

In this context, WFUNA wishes to point out that the term "accreditation" appears nowhere in Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV). The very fact of having been granted consultative status gives an NGO access and participatory rights without any further scrutiny. It also carries with it the right to register (not be accredited) as observer at any time during the sessions of the Council (and its subsidiary bodies) or international conferences, as well as to benefit from adequate seating arrangements.

Earlier in this statement WFUNA expressed the view that the definition of international NGOs contained in Economic and Social Council resolution

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1296 (XLIV) requires no changes. However, in connection with international conferences there is a need to elaborate a definition of a national NGO. WFUNA is convinced that for the benefit of the substantive work of conferences, the legitimacy of those who wish to be accepted as observers must be verified, especially taking into account that WFUNA advocates the granting of full participatory rights to NGOs not in consultative status, and that the newly emerging public movements are composed not only of NGOs, but also of unstructured interest or pressure groups whose constituency and outreach is difficult to verify. For business groups, universities and other entities, some special forms of acceptance and provisions for contributions may be devised.

Human beings have, throughout history, organized themselves into groups to pursue common ideas and goals. Some well-known examples in recent times are the international movements for disarmament and peace, environmental groups, the anti-apartheid coalitions and the world-wide mobilization for the rights of women. Also, more recently, we have witnessed the growing importance of national and international groups concerned with sustainable development and human rights issues. All these groups have, naturally, sought an international outreach, wanted to establish world-wide networks and asked to be heard at the United Nations and its conferences.

WFUNA warmly welcomes all those who want to work with the United Nations and encourages the United Nations system to respond with equal warmth and openness. WFUNA has clearly stated, on several occasions, the need to open the United Nations doors as broadly as possible. Thus, WFUNA appeals to the Working Group to build on the positive experience of present arrangements and, more important, to provide for new opportunities for NGO participation. WFUNA strongly urges the extension of participatory rights to those NGOs that do not now have consultative status. However, it is most important that any process of opening up the United Nations to new NGOs, whether national or international in scope, be structured, transparent and consistent. As stated earlier, such a process must not infringe on present participatory rights.

WFUNA would be very pleased indeed to see any of its member United Nations associations granted consultative status, since there are times that WFUNA, as a federation, must speak with one voice, and there are times that United Nations associations have their own views and expertise to be expressed.

WFUNA wishes to underline that it is conscious of management problems which may result in accepting too many NGOs to the Economic and Social Council or to international conferences. We do not think that the solution to the problem is imposing on NGOs forms of "clustering" or creating "constituencies" or "major groups". It seems to us that as the first measure, more caution should be exercised in granting status or admission to conferences.

The recent Fourth World Conference on Women was a perfect example of the problem WFUNA would like to bring to your attention. There were so many NGOs registered for the Conference that it was decided by the Conference secretariat on site that those NGOs who already had consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and who were not "women's groups" should not be given the right to speak, on the premise that they could always be heard in the Council. National and local organizations were given priority over the NGOs in

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consultative status. It was, frankly, a disgrace. WFUNA did speak but there were many other NGOs that should have been given the right to speak and were denied the privilege.

Finally, WFUNA wishes to emphasize again that increased NGO participation requires properly increased logistical services from the Secretariat. The NGO Section should be strengthened by upgrading its capability to cope with not only its normal duties, to serve the Working Group but also to meet the challenge it will face after the United Nations doors have been widely opened.

In view of the fact that the new Economic and Social Council resolution is expected to regulate United Nations-NGO relations for the next several years, we suggest that the text omit what could be termed unnecessary ideological or political references contained in the introduction and in some other parts of the text. A sound legal document should not include such statements for the simple reason that they often leave open the possibility of unfortunate or controversial interpretations. A brief statement of guiding principles that underlie the resolution is probably more desirable and could easily be formulated.

We are deeply concerned that the participatory rights of NGOs are in danger of being significantly curtailed by several provisions in the proposed draft resolution. For example, we object to:

- The conditionality attached to the circulation by the Secretary-General of written statements of NGOs (para. 31);

- Imposing the requirement to coordinate joint oral and written submissions by NGOs (paras. 11 and 51).

Finally, WFUNA would like to re-emphasize its readiness to offer its expertise in the further drafting of a new resolution governing these extremely important consultative arrangements between non-governmental organizations and the United Nations.

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